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RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0672  
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000536

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/03/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [MASS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA'S CHILD SOLDIERS: INITIAL STEPS WELCOME,  
BUT MORE NEEDED

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires James R. Moore. REASONS: 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In May 22-23 meetings, DRL DAS Barks-Ruggles obtained an update on the government's efforts to release child soldiers. She urged Justice Secretary Gamalath to put in place effective measures to combat the problem, and pressed the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of the Disaster Management and Human Rights Ministry to rapidly ensure further releases of TMVP-held child soldiers. Barks-Ruggles also discussed the prospects for further releases of child soldiers with the UNICEF child protection officer. UNICEF expressed concern that pressure on the GSL to effect the release of the children may abate following the conclusion of Eastern Provincial Council elections and the vote to deny Sri Lanka another term on the Human Rights Council. UNICEF said it was working on a proposal for joint monitoring with the GSL of TMVP camps and facilities that might help secure the release of the remaining children and deter future enlistment. End Summary.

12. (C) In a May 23 meeting, UNICEF Child Protection Service Head Andrew Brooks thanked DRL DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles for U.S. efforts to obtain the release of child soldiers serving with the government-allied paramilitary TamilEela Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP). He expressed concern that the momentum generated by the first two releases would stall now that the Eastern Provincial Council elections, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Universal Periodic Review of Sri Lanka, and the election for UNHRC seats are over. Brooks reported that only 9 of the 39 children released so far were in UNICEF's files. Brooks believed that some TMVP commanders under newly appointed Eastern Province Chief Minister Pillaiyan oppose further releases. Brooks gave credit to the Ministry of Defense for pressuring the TMVP, saying Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa had been cooperative and instrumental in the 39 releases. He told us UNICEF was under pressure to release the names of the remaining 76 child soldiers in their files. However, he said UNICEF would refuse to release the names, since that could endanger the families who reported missing children and would work against the larger goal of releasing all the children and instituting measures to prevent future child recruitment. Based on releases thus far and UNICEF's staff observations when touring areas in the East, Brooks says UNICEF estimates there are "a couple to several hundred" child soldiers still held

by the TMVP and other affiliated militias.

13. (C) Brooks noted that some, perhaps many, of the children currently in the TMVP may not be serving against their will. TMVP service brings money, security and protection to the children's families. However, UNICEF had not yet conducted enough interviews of those released to determine whether the freed children not on its list correlate to those serving voluntarily. Brooks reported that recent ICRC efforts to obtain the release of children from the East serving with the LTTE had failed when the Ministry of Defense refused to permit their handover, fearing that the children might be LTTE "sleeper" agents. Brooks spoke highly of the recently renovated rehabilitation center in Ambepussa, which has the capacity to accept up to 200 children, but currently only shelters a fraction of that number. He stressed the importance of longer-term preventive measures such as cooperative efforts with the government to rehabilitate the children and joint monitoring to ensure that children are not recruited in the future. He noted that UNICEF is floating with the GSL the idea of joint monitoring, which the government is considering.

14. (C) DAS Barks-Ruggles and DCM, in a May 22 meeting with Ministry of Justice Secretary Suhada Gamalath, stressed that the USG places great importance on the issue of child soldiers. They explained that the USG's ability to provide air and maritime surveillance assistance would be suspended until the GSL put in place "effective measures" to combat the problem. Gamalath initially questioned the accuracy of

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UNICEF's figure of 76 known child soldiers in the TMVP. He underlined the "sensitivity" for the TMVP of the subject of further releases, but assured us that he would speak with TMVP leader and newly named Eastern Province Chief Minister Pillaiyan within the week. Gamalath said the situation needed to be handled carefully, since Pillaiyan was not easy to deal with and had a different mindset after "being in the forest" for 20 years. Gamalath confirmed Brooks' portrayal of a complex dynamic within the TMVP, saying that many commanders under Pillaiyan opposed releasing the children. Gamalath stated that he recognized the importance of the issue, adding that if the GSL could obtain the release of the TMVP's child soldiers it would increase pressure on the LTTE to follow suit. Gamalath praised the country's rehabilitation centers and hoped the government would also invest in vocational training for youth as a preventative measure to combat future enlistment.

15. (C) DAS Barks-Ruggles also raised the need for rapid action to effectuate further releases of all remaining child soldiers from the TMVP and affiliated militias in meetings with Foreign Secretary Kohona, Attorney General De Silva and Secretary of Disaster Management and Human Rights Amarasinghe. All agreed on the need to move forward but followed much the same line as Gamalath, pleading the difficulties of convincing Pillaiyan to move forward, and his inability to fully control all of his sub-commanders who are holding children.

16. (C) COMMENT: Post shares Brooks' concern that the momentum generated by the first two waves of releases could wane now that the UNHRC vote and the Eastern elections have passed. Multiple sources have indicated that while Pillaiyan himself may want to release the children, he faces resistance from TMVP field commanders, some of whom reportedly remain loyal to Karuna. In late April, following the second wave of releases, Pillaiyan was quoted in the Sri Lankan press saying that the latest release of children "has brought the issue of child soldiers in the east...to an end." Based on the ratio of those released (39) to the number of those found on UNICEF's list (9), a reasonable estimate of the remaining child soldiers in the TMVP would be in the range 200-300. Further, UNICEF reports that they know of 15 children recruited by the TMVP so far this year. We consider that

UNICEF's proposal for a joint monitoring mechanism with the GSL could be an effective tool to help ensure the release of the others and to deter future underage recruitment. If this could be put in place and demonstrated to work, including effectuating rapid further releases of the remaining child soldiers, it might enable the Secretary to certify that the GSL has taken "effective measures" as required under U.S. law.

17. (U) DRL DAS Barks-Ruggles cleared this message.  
MOORE